

Message Text

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PAGE 01 PANAMA 04158 091622Z

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 4158

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PN

SUBJECT: JEWS IN PANAMA

REF: PANAMA 4002

SUMMARY: A "JEWISH QUESTION" IS LITTLE BY LITTLE INSINUATING
ITSELF INTO PANAMANIAN POLITICS AND INTO U.S. PANAMANIAN RELATIONS.

SO

FAR THIS PROBLEM HAS BEEN UNDER CONTROL; BUT SINCE SOME PANAMANIAN
AS WELL AS AMERICANS SEE EXACERBATION OF THIS FALSE ISSUE AS A
WAY TO DEFEAT A TREATY, THERE IS A LIKELIHOOD OF WORSE AHEAD.
END SUMMARY.

1. PANAMA'S JEWISH COMMUNITY NUMBERS PERHAPS 4000, BUT IT IS
INFLUENTIAL BEYOND ITS NUMBERS. ANTI-SEMITISM IS NOTABLE FOR ITS
ABSENCE. SO MUCH SO THAT THE RECENT APPEARANCE OF TWO ANTI-
SEMITIC FLYERS HERE CAUSED MUCH COMMENT BECAUSE OF THE RARITY OF
SUCH VIEWS IN PANAMA. (REFTEL). A FEW JEWS HAVE HELD IMPORTANT
OFFICE IN THE TORRIJOS REGIME, BUT MOST ARE IN BUSINESS OF
THE PROFESSIONS AND FOR THE MOST PART STAY OUT OF POLITICS.
THE FATHER OF DONA RAQUEL, TORRIJOS' WIFE, WAS A JEW. TORRIJOS
CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 02 PANAMA 04158 091622Z

AND A NUMBER OF OTHER HIGH GUARD OFFICERS AND CABINET MINISTERS
SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO THE LOCAL JEWISH SCHOOL (WHERE JEWISH
HISTORY IS A REQUIRED SUBJECT). FOR BACKGROUND ON JEWISH
COMMUNITY IN PANAMA SEE A JUNE 1974 ARTICLE WRITTEN BY RICHARD YAFFE
IN THE NATIONAL JEWISH MONTHLY MAGAZINE, PUBLISHED IN WASHINGTON.

2. OVER THE YEARS THE JEWISH COMMUNITY HAS HAD READY ACCESS

TO TORRIJOS THROUGH THE HEAD OF THE SCHOOL, WHO HAS BEEN A FRIEND AND SOMETIME ADVISER. UNTIL FAIRLY RECENTLY PANAMA WAS RATHER CONSISTENTLY PRO-ISRAELI. THIS WAS REFLECTED NOT ONLY BY VOTES IN THE UNN BUT IN FAIRLY CLOSE MILITARY, TRADE AND CULTURAL RELATIONS. SOME STRAIN ON THIS CLOSENESS HAS DEVELOPED AS PANAMA HAS SOUGHT TO PORTRAY ITSELF AS A THIRD WORLD LEADER.

ONE OF TORRIJOS' MAIN TACTICS IN SEEKING A NEW CANAL TREATY HAS BEEN TO MOBILIZE WORLD SUPPORT FOR ITS POSITION. THIS HAS ENTAILED SOME TRADE-OFFS WITH THE ARABS. THOUGH PANAMA HAS STUCK WITH ISRAEL ON SUCH MAJOR ISSUES AS ZIONISM-RACISM AND THE ENTEBBE RAID, IT HAS ALSO SOUGHT TO CURRY FAVOR WITH THE ARABS. FOR EXAMPLE, THE GOVERNMENT FORCED ITS CHESS TEAM TO PULL OUT OF THE RECENT "OLYMPIC" TOURNAMENT IN ISRAEL IN FAVOR OF A RIVAL TOURNAMENT IN LIBYA. PANAMA HAS ALSO TAKEN PRO-ARAB STANDS AT SEVERAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES, SUCH AS THE MAR DEL PLATA WATER CONFERENCE.

3. THE MOST DISTURBING (AND POTENTIALLY DAMAGING) DEVELOPMENTS HAVE COME OUT OF TORRIJOS' TRIP TO LIBYA. THE VISIT WAS APPARENTLY A DUD FROM MOST ANGLES, AND TORRIJOS AVOIDED FALLING INTO AN ANTI-ISRAEL TRAP. BUT IT HAS HAD AND WILL CONTINUE TO HAVE A POISONOUS SPINOFF. THE MERE FACT OF VISITING QADHAFI, WITH HIS REPUTATION FOR ANTI-JEWISH FANATICISM AND PROTECTION OF TERRORISTS, WAS ENOUGH TO SET OFF A WAVE OF CONCERN IN THE LOCAL JEWISH COMMUNITY. WHEN THE VISIT TURNED OUT TO BE NON-EVENT, THE COMMUNITY HEAVED A CORRESPONDING SIGH OF RELIEF. BUT RUMORS AROUND PANAMA CITY THAT THERE WILL BE LIBYAN-PANAMANIAN MILITARY EXCHANGES THIS SUMMER

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 PANAMA 04158 091622Z

HAVE RAISED EYEBROWS BOTH IN PANAMA AND THE CANAL ZONE. ("WHAT COULD THE LIBYANS POSSIBLY TEACH PANAMA BUT TERRORISM?").

4. THE "LIBYAN" ITEM WHICH HAS CAUSED THE GREATEST STIR AMONG PANAMA'S JEWS IS A DOCUMENT SIGNED BY CARLOS PEREZ HERRERA, A MEMBER OF THE LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION AND AUTHENTICATED BY A FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIAL. THIS PAPER, WHICH IS CIRCULATING HERE AND IN THE US. (WAGNER, ARA/PAN, HAS A COPY) IS AN ASSURANCE "TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN" BY PEREZ HERRERA, IN HIS CAPACITY AS A MEMBER OF THE LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION, THAT THE YUGOSLAVIAN-MAJORITY COMPANY ENERGOPROJEKT, THE BUILDER OF THE STATE-OWNED BAYANO DAM "HAS NEVER HAD ANY CONNECTION OF ANY NATURE WITH JEWISH OR ZIONIST PERSONS OR COMPANIES. THE JEWISH COMMUNITY REACTED AT FIRST WITH ANGER. IN THE FIRST PLACE, IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT THE PANAMANIAN REPRESENTATIVE IS OF ENERGOPROJEKT A PROMINENT LOCAL JEW. (THE ISRAELI AMBASSADOR HERE INFORM US THAT HE IS ALSO AN ISRAELI CITIZEN.) FURTHERMORE, OTHER JEWS WERE ALSO INVOLVED WITH ENERGOPROJEKT.

5. SOON AFTER THE DOCUMENT BEGAN TO CIRCULATE LAST MONTH THE ISRAELI AMBASSADOR RAISED THE MATTER WITH CARLOS OZORES, VICE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. OZORES TOLD THE AMBASSADOR THAT AT AN EARLY OPPORTUNITY HE WOULD TAKE THE MATTER UP WITH TORRIJOS AND EXPLAIN WHAT MISCHIEF A THING LIKE THIS COULD CAUSE.

6. NOBODY WITH WHOM WE HAVE TALKED HERE BELIEVES THAT THIS DOCUMENT REFLECTS THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT'S (E.E., TORRIJOS') POSITION. CERTAINLY THE LEADERS OF THE PANAMANIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY DO NOT. THEY TOLD US JUNE 6 THAT PEREZ HERRERA IS THE ONLY ANTI-ISRAEL (AND PERHAPS ANTI-JEWISH) OFFICIAL THEY KNEW OF IN THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT. THEY SADLY REMARKED THAT, THOUGH AMERICANS MAY NOT FIND IT EASY TO UNDERSTAND, PANAMA IS THE SORT OF COUNTRY WHERE AN OFFICIAL COULD ON HIS OWN HOOK MAKE SUCH A STATEMENT AND GET AWAY WITH IT BECAUSE HE IS THE CHIEF OF GOVERNMENT'S COUSIN. IN THEIR JUDGEMENT, THAT IS PRECISELY WHAT HAPPENED. PEREZ HERRERA'S MEMO IS "A SCRAP OF PAPER" WITH NO LEGAL CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 PANAMA 04158 091622Z

WEIGHT, IN THE WORDS OF ONE LEADING PANAMANIAN JEW; WE AGREE. THE FACT THAT THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED ERSA PRESS CONTAINED AN OUTSPOKEN LETTER FROM A JEW CALLING PEREZ HERRERA A LIAR IS EVIDENT THAT TORRIJOS IS NOT PLEASED WITH HIS COUSIN. JUNE 5'S "DOMINICAL" PROMINENTLY DISPLAYED FRONT PAGE(WITH HEADLINE) AN OPEN LETTER FROM DAVID MIZRACHI, A PROMINENT LOCAL JEW, RAKING PEREZ HERRERA WITH A BROADSIDE OF INVECTIVE. (A TRANSLATION HAS BEEN PHONED TO ARA/PAN - GUTHRIE.) ASKED BY ERSA'S "CRITICA" TO COMMENT, PEREZ HERRERA SAID THAT MANY OF HIS BEST FRIENDS WERE JEWS AND THAT HE WOULD BE PREPARING A RESPONSE TO MIZRACHI.

7. COMMENT: THE LOCAL JEWISH COMMUNITY IS APPALLED TO SEE ITSELF BEING USED AS A PAWN AGAINST THEIR GOVERNMENT AND AGAINST A NEW TREATY. (SEE REFTEL, "CRITICA" PUBLISHED A LETTER FROM ZONE CIVIC LEADER PATRICIA FULTON TO SENATOR JAVITS, COMMENTING ON THE LOCAL JEWS' PRESUMED PROBLEMS.) WHILE THEY HAVE DISTINCTLY VARIED FEELINGS ABOUT TORRIJOS AND ARE UNEASY ABOUT POSSIBLE FUTURE PRO-ARAB ACTIONS BY TORRIJOS, THEY SEEM NEAR-UNANIMOUS IN FAVORING A TREATY. BUT MOST OF ALL THEY WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE.
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